

Modern vs. Traditional

By Rao Zhenhui

With the rapid development of EFL teaching in non-English-speaking countries, English teachers have become more aware that the exclusive use of either the communicative approach or grammar-translation method does not suit all English teaching situations. Teachers have also discovered that no single teaching method deals with everything that concerns the form, the use, and the content of the target language. The overall situation is probably still as Roberts (1982) described: "The communicative approach, and we will now use the term to refer to the British tradition, is in many ways a commitment to eclecticism in practice and cannot be otherwise." Harvey (1985) states: "What might be called traditional methods and skills are not necessarily unworkable alongside modern EFL teaching methods. The idea that the two are mutually exclusive is absurd."

What EFL teachers in China need to do now is to modernize, not Westernize, English teaching. They need to combine the new with the old so as to adapt the communicative approach to traditional teaching structures.

Communicative Approach vs. Grammar-translation Method

Since teaching is deeply rooted in the local philosophy, culture, and basic concepts of education, the students' learning styles and habits in language acquisition must be considered. Although the grammar-translation method is out of favor, students accustomed to this method may still derive benefit from it. For example, Chinese students generally show great interest in language structures and linguistic details when they are learning a language. "We would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively" (Harvey 1985). Therefore, in teaching English to Chinese students, appropriate grammar analysis is essential, especially for beginners. Limited utilization of translation from or to the target language is an indispensable part of teaching. Vocabulary work and pattern drills are also ways of familiarizing the student with sentence structures. This information helps learners acquire linguistic competence.

But instead of teaching grammar traditionally and drilling grammar patterns, teachers need to relate teaching grammar and pattern drills to meaning and use. In other words, language structure practice should be used in contexts that involve some basic principles of appropriateness. This is the exact area that the traditional EFL teaching has long overlooked—teaching English for a communicative purpose. Thus, English teaching should be partly communicatively oriented, so students can acquaint themselves with appropriate language usage.

In teaching grammar, it is important to make the language situations and language material as realistic as possible. Immediately after supplying students with adequate explanations of grammar functions, the teacher can provide students with suitable situations that encourage students to ultimately use the rules in real-life communication. For instance, in teaching the modal auxiliaries *can* and *may*, what should be made clear is that the two modals are not

synonyms and that there are contexts in which only one of them is appropriate. Thus, these two sentences have slightly different meanings:

1. It can be very nice to have a picnic in winter.
2. It may be very nice to have a picnic in winter.

Accuracy vs. Fluency

There is no denying the fact that both accuracy and fluency are essential in language learning. However, in English teaching dominated by the grammar-translation method, accuracy is emphasized more than fluency. Students in such classrooms are extremely particular about linguistic details. They never feel satisfied with their language productions until the correct answers are provided. They are keenly interested in the exact words, have a low tolerance of ambiguity, and tend to focus on discrete grammar points and specific syntactic constructions (Barnhouse 1981). So the question arises as to the relationship between accuracy and fluency and which one should take precedence. These questions must be examined in relation to what is expected of the students when they graduate and what the teaching conditions are.

Modern society is in need of people who not only read English well but also speak it fluently. As for beginners, they must have a solid foundation in English, which is primarily, though not solely, built on accuracy. It is believed that once bad language habits are formed, they are difficult to break. Moreover, for the students who are learning English in a non-English-speaking country, there is little chance for them to learn an acceptable form of English outside the classroom. So, in order to achieve accuracy, students need rigorous language training in their classes.

However, accuracy does not mean 100% error-free, an impossible achievement. But during the controlled and semicontrolled language practice periods for beginners, a high degree of accuracy should be required. Not only are the students encouraged to make as few errors as possible, but they are expected to manipulate the language system as spontaneously and flexibly as possible.

Of course, fluency in language learning goes far beyond that. Soon after the students have mastered the language forms, they ought to be given intensive fluency practice. Then, as control is withdrawn, students can use the language more freely. At this stage, errors should be tolerated, and the teacher should emphasize that error-making is not at all disgraceful but a natural and common practice. Teachers assess the students' performances at the end of each fluency practice so that the students are aware of their weaknesses and become more and more conscious of their errors. In this way, accuracy and fluency are practiced almost simultaneously. Accuracy and fluency are not mutually exclusive, but are interdependent.

Linguistic Competence vs. Communicative Competence

The relation between linguistic competence and communicative competence also is important. At the foundation stage, linguistic competence is the spontaneous, flexible, and correct manipulation of the language system. Communicative competence involves principles of appropriateness and a readiness on the part of the learner to use relevant strategies in coping with certain language situations. Linguistic competence, then, is the basis of communicative competence. Without linguistic competence, there is no communicative competence. But communicative competence

does not automatically result from linguistic competence. Forms of classroom activities such as role playing, simulations, and real-life interactions should be used to provide as much practice as possible for students to develop communicative competence while practicing linguistic competence.

Student-centered Orientation

To facilitate language acquisition, students need much practice. So, teachers must ensure that classroom interactions are managed, not just by the teacher, but by all present. In order to avoid being the center of classroom interactions, teachers should arrange the desks in such a way that the students can look directly at one another. This helps create interactions among the students. The teacher does not act as leader of the class, but class leadership emerges from within the group.

Teacher's Role

Instead of being the dominating authority in the classroom, the teacher facilitates the communicative process among all the learners and between the students and the various tasks, giving guidance and advice when necessary. Furthermore, teachers act as independent participants within the learning-teaching group. Any unnecessary intervention on the teacher's part may prevent learners from becoming genuinely involved in the activities and thus hinder the development of their communicative skills.

However, this does not mean that once a teaching activity is in progress, the teacher should become a passive observer. It is still the teacher's obligation to develop the students' potential through external direction. Although the teacher may be nondirective in general, it is still the teacher's responsibility to recognize the distinctive qualities in the students (Han 1979) and to help the students develop those qualities.

In contemporary English teaching, the teacher's function should become less dominant than before, but no less important. For example, his/her role as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group is closely related to the objective of his/her role as communicative activator. These roles include a set of secondary roles for the teacher: first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource; and second, as a guide and manager of activities. A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge, abilities, and actual and observed experience in the nature of learning (Breen and Candlin 1980).

One of the important components of communicative competence is the ability to select a linguistic form that is appropriate for a specific situation (Hymes 1981). Hendon (1980) argues that "today language has been redefined as an integral part of the culture with which it is connected." There is plenty of evidence that a good command of English grammar, vocabulary, and syntax does not necessarily add up to a good mastery of English. There is a set of social conventions governing language form and behavior within a communicative group.

Conclusion

EFL teaching in China, with its traditional setting, is markedly different from that in the United States and Great Britain in that it is conducted in different social and cultural contexts. Yet this

does not mean that the communicative approach is not applicable in such a context. To make this approach work well in China, we must reconcile it with the traditional grammar-translation method that is still popularly used in China.

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